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Inhabitable Worlds: Troubling disability, debility, and ability narratives

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This article is part of the series: Inhabitable Worlds (<http://somatosphere.net/series/inhabitable-worlds>)

This series will interrogate the theoretical tools and approaches that scholars bring to the study of disability in the social sciences. Scholars have recently turned a focused attention on different states of bodily and sensorial experience; we aim to connect these concerns with questions about how people experiencing such differences create inhabitable worlds. In doing so, we draw inspiration from Martin Heidegger's provocative neologism "worlding." Building on Heidegger, Mei Zhan states that worlds are "emergent socialities entangled in dynamic imaginaries of pasts, futures, and presents" and that they are constantly being made and remade (Zhan 2009, 6). We see "inhabitable worlds" as both analytic and material worlds, worlds that have existed, that do exist, and that will exist. And perhaps most importantly, we see inhabitable worlds as worlds that people themselves inhabit and aspire towards.

In approaching bodies and senses through the lens of inhabitable worlds, we aim to further inquire into age-old scholarly investigations about embodiment to think through a current fascination with the senses and to trouble social categories such as "disability," "debility," and "ability." Grappling with narratives about bodily function and the senses, we propose a series where scholars go beyond the binaries of ability and disability, and capacity and incapacity, to understand the body and senses as being volatile, unstable, and in flux. This series focuses on inhabitable worlds both as an alternative to and a mode to think through medical concepts of rehabilitation and habilitation. Medical discourses shape the ways people come to experience bodily

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difference; people also transform these discourses through political advocacy and personal tactics they develop to navigate the material realities of bodily differences and built environments .

While rehabilitation suggests some sort of return to a prior state and habilitation suggests a lack to be remedied by gain, the concept of “inhabitable worlds” moves us away from such teleologies. In contrast, we are most interested in understanding people’s everyday practices and the tactics that they use to make sense and meaning in and of their worlds. Rather than a possession model of having legs, having hearing, having abilities or not, we are asking contributors to think through action – theories of habit, intention, movement, and stasis through space and time. Contributors to this series range from anthropologists to disability studies scholars to communication scholars to performing artists. Our goal is to explore the diversity of thinking about bodily and sensory differences and to examine how people create and dwell in inhabitable worlds.

At the same time, contributors to this series are also mindful of broader context. How do disability worlds (Rapp and Ginsburg 2013) exist in relation to other kinds of social, political, and economic worlds? How do disability worlds articulate with and remake these other worlds? On the one hand, we want to be mindful of how disabled peoples’ lives are being rendered increasingly marginal and precarious by neoliberal political economic practices and policies. On the other hand, we also want to think about the ways that disability as a category is a privileged site for development interventions and corporate initiatives. As such, contributors attend to the ways that the marginal is also central and how both disability experiences and the category of disability have become norms in and of themselves.

The political and economic dimensions of inhabitable worlds are intersected with gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nationality. Disability as a relational and intersectional category is generative – it helps produce identity politics, advocacy, and (alternative) public spheres. Disability has also been mobilized in ways that reproduce social hierarchies – masculine narratives of overcoming difficulty (or possessing super abilities) through sports or elite forms of representation that deny other axes of difference. Through various ways, contributors help dismantle disparities through a (re)imagining of disability within “inhabitable worlds” – one that is relational, recognizes bodily limits, and acknowledges interdependencies between people. In other words, inhabitable worlds are undeniably social and grounded in everyday life.

Inhabitable Worlds (<http://somatosphere.net/series/inhabitable-worlds>) is a series that examines the theoretical tools and approaches that scholars bring to the study of disability in the social sciences and humanities. It is edited by Michele Friedner

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Editor’s note: New entries in this series will be published each Monday.

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